



GUNDOWN

RAY RHAMEY

GUNDOWN



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GUNDOWN



RAY RHAMEY



Unbeaten paths to worthy reads.
Ashland, Oregon

I urge you to share *Gundown* with as many people as you wish.
And then talk about it.



The platypus breaks all the rules—it's the only mammal that lays eggs, is venomous, has a duck bill, a beaver tail, and otter feet—and it does just fine, thank you very much.

It can be the same for novels that don't slip tidily into genre pigeonholes. Platypus takes readers on unique paths to entertainment, truth, and enjoyable reads.

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Dedication

This book was written for my children and their children, and for yours, in hopes that the America they inherit is an improvement on the one that gives rise to this story.

And it's for people who work hard to live good lives, to leave this place better than they found it. It's for you.

Finally, I dedicate this work to my wife Sarah, who would prefer that it was a mystery but has always helped me all along the way.

IN A POSSIBLE NEAR FUTURE



MEAN STREET

The sky a sunny blue over Chicago, Hank lengthened his stride and sliced through the noontime trudge of pedestrians on Michigan Avenue. He didn't want to be late—it isn't every day an NRA executive calls you up and says he has a mission for you.

Oh, man, to have a life again. While he sure as hell didn't miss the army, he hated not being a cop anymore, sworn to protect and serve. His sense of duty needed something to do.

He shoved aside a spike of fear that his PTSD would get in his way today—lifted by a rare rush of well-being, he felt sharp, at his best. This could be his road back.

No, more. A road forward.

Damned if he was going to be another digit in veteran suicide stats.

A tiresome clump of a half dozen gang jerks swaggered toward him with cocky menace, three of them with pistols in their hands. Sure, they had the right to carry them, but these guys were pushing it. The gangbangers blocked most of the sidewalk, forcing people to step off the curb or sidle along a building front.

He locked his gaze onto the eyes of the center guy, who carried a Glock semi-automatic. Hank slid his hand inside his Windbreaker to the familiar feel of the .45 Colt semiautomatic in his shoulder holster and walked straight ahead.

The kid held onto his cool until they came together but, one stride from colliding, he dropped his gaze and sidestepped.

Never slowing, Hank walked on.

This was going to be a good day.

...

Jewel Washington pushed through the lunchtime flow of people that filled the plaza beside the Chicago River, searching for Murphy. The lard-ass cop said he'd be here, and her brother would be hurtin' bad if she didn't get the pink Timmy needed.

A clot of gangstas swaggered through the crowd, dangling pistols in their hands, radiating dares no one answered. Creeps oughta get a life. Jewel cut wide, careful to avert her gaze even though she'd rather glare at them. But that could set them off.

Instead, she lifted her face to the spring sun. Its warmth promised good things. Maybe it would add to the spray of freckles like chocolate dots against the brown of her cheeks.

She spotted Murphy, a fat blue boulder parting a stream of girly secretaries hurrying to cram in their noontime shopping, a boulder that leered at their bobbing chests.

His piggy eyes stumbled across her when she closed in on him. He sent his gaze on its usual tour of her body—yeah, she was wearing a scoop-neck top and a miniskirt, but what the hell, couldn't a girl enjoy a spring day without some slob feeling her up with his eyeballs?

When she got to him, she held out forty bucks for a packet of pink, the only thing that could stop Timmy's withdrawal agony—for a while.

Murphy ogled her. "I decided to take it in services instead a cash." He aimed a fat thumb at Pioneer Court behind him. "Got a spot for a quick hummer behind them bushes over there in the courtyard."

In the shadow from the Equitable Building, raised beds of marble broke up the dreary pavement with boxes of green shrubs, trees, flowers, and a fountain.

She didn't have another way to get the drug, but this was bullshit. She lifted her chin and looked him in the eyes. "You

don't want my cash, there's dealers in the 'hood."

"Bitch." He snatched her money and handed her a packet of pink just as a bony white teen shuffled up to them, his nose leaking, body shivering, winces flickering across his face. Jewel had seen the same thing in Timmy—it had been too long since the kid's last hit of pink.

He held out a handful of grubby bills. "N-n-need one."

Murphy took his time counting the money while the kid jittered. It hurt to look at him, he was so much like her brother—she turned away. No, she wasn't gonna go there. Too nice a day and nothin' she could do about it.

The clock on the Wrigley Building said she had time to do a little window-shopping before she had to be back at work, so she headed north toward Water Tower Place, not that she could afford anything in the boutiques there. A breeze reeking of car exhaust swirled between the skyscrapers, but she liked its touch.

She stopped at a restaurant window to eye a cupcake display. Her ice-blue eyes, donated by some honky ancestor, reflected back at her. So did her scar, a three-inch trail curving down from high on her cheekbone.

Jewel gave her body the once-over like Murphy had. Still lookin' good . . . Wait a minute, was that a little bit of extra tummy? She turned sideways. Damn, gettin' poochy. Should she diet? Exercise? Both? She sucked her gut in and walked on.

Two white dudes slouched against a gun store smacked kisses at her. A green stripe ran down the center of the blond's buzz-cut hair, and a red do-rag decorated the smaller guy's shaved head—he cupped his balls and licked his lips. Ugh. She lengthened her stride, her mini skirt riding high.

They pushed off from the store and swung into step on each side of her. Green-Stripe crowded against her. His sour stink assaulted her, and the skin on her arms goose-bumped. He said, "Hey, brown sugar."

She wanted to say, "I'm not your sugar," but no, she just kept going. Staring straight ahead, she said, "There's a cop back there."

He laughed. “Yeah. Murphy.”

Wishing she wasn’t wearing heels, she broke into a run and darted between a couple holding hands.

Do-Rag flashed past Jewel and then stopped a few feet ahead, arms spread wide. A hand grabbed at her elbow from behind. She jerked free, cut around a woman with a stroller, and then ran back toward Murphy.

Green-Stripe caught her arm and yanked her to a stop. He swung her to face him and leaned close. “You need somethin’ to relax you, chocklit, and I’m it.”

She yanked free and spun.

His partner stood waiting for her.

They grabbed her arms and forced her toward Pioneer Court. They hauled her behind a clump of bushes—they could be seen from the plaza, but only above the waist. She pulled with all her strength, but couldn’t tear free.

Thirty feet away, Murphy stared at her.

She cried, “Murphy?”

He didn’t move.

But there were a ton of people walking by. “Help me! Somebody! Hey!”

Glances flicked in her direction from the throng on the sidewalk and then skittered away. See no evil, don’t get involved, stay safe; she’d done the same a thousand times.

Okay, what she had to do now was live through this.

• • •

A shout from behind Hank cut into his thoughts. He turned to see two scruffy punks pull a young woman behind a cluster of bushes in the courtyard. A reflexive impulse to go to the rescue fired up . . . but a policeman was close by. She’d be all right.

The woman’s cry came again. “Murphy!” The officer, a wide man with multiple chins, faced the action.

Hank stayed where he was. What the hell, he could spare a minute to lend a hand if needed.

The shorter punk held the woman’s arms from behind while the blond with a stupid green stripe in his hair ripped her shirt open. She wasn’t wearing a bra.

She yelled to the cop, “Murphy! Murphy, it’s me!”

Quick, smooth, Clothes-Ripper slipped his hand inside his Bulls jacket and pulled out an automatic pistol. He jammed it under her chin and forced her head back. Then he gave the officer a screw-you smile.

Hank knew what he’d do, and he was a good-enough shot to do it, but how would the uniform handle it?

The cop moved on, hands clasped behind his back as if just out for a stroll in a peaceful park.

Rage fired in Hank. The son of a bitch turned his back on his sworn duty!?! Hank clenched his fists, tempted to go after the coward, but the woman needed help.

The kid stuffed his pistol back under his jacket and unzipped his pants. A yell from the woman shriveled into a wail. “Murphyyyyy.”

The cop didn’t look back. People flowed past, unseeing, as if they wore blinders.

The woman staggered her attacker with a kick to his leg. He slapped her, and then had to dodge a knee aimed at his balls. Girl had guts.

Hank moved closer, stepping behind a tall shrub that concealed him from the passing crowd. He drew his Colt, pulled the silencer from his pocket, twisted it on, and settled into a marksman’s stance, legs spread, both arms up, his gun hand steady.

The punk holding the woman’s arms saw Hank, and his grin O’d toward a shout. Hank couldn’t allow a warning—the one with the gun was fast. Hank’s bullet stopped the kid’s yell in his mouth and slammed him back. His hands didn’t know he was dead, and he pulled the woman on top of him when he fell away from the little garden. They sprawled on the pavement, and the woman gaped at Hank as he swung his gun to the other guy.

Hank shouted, “Freeze!”

The tall one spun toward him. Green-Stripe jerked his gun out of his jacket as he yelled, “You’re dea—”

Hank shot him in the heart. The kid staggered back. He looked down at his chest and then up at Hank, his eyes wide like those of a scared little boy. His knees buckled and he collapsed, his gun clattering on the pavement.

Hank spun around—if there was any law nearby he was willing to be late for his meeting to show his old badge and square things away, but the chicken-livered cop was gone and there were no other uniforms in sight. Passersby glanced at the bodies beside the garden and then focused on where they were going. He took a deep breath to ease the rush of adrenaline and concentrated on the mechanical rhythm of removing the silencer and stuffing his pistol into his holster. He’d call 911 and report the shooting.

The NRA had the right idea when they said, “The surest way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.”

The woman scrambled to her feet. Clutching at her torn top, she stared at the mess that had been her attackers, then at Hank.

She looked like she was okay, and he had a meeting. He turned his back on her and stepped into the mindless herd, looking for the cop. He wanted to bury a fist in his fat gut, but there was no sign of the creep. Hank picked up his pace. He needed some action to keep his head straight, and maybe this NRA thing could generate something. Too much downtime was . . . well, too much. Stuff kept bubbling up that his meds and pot had trouble handling . . .

• • •

Jewel trembled, the scar on her cheek throbbing as though it remembered old trouble. She breathed deep and settled herself down. Her mama had always said, “In this world, you got to be hard. Ain’t nobody there for you but you.” Hallelujah, Mama.

She’d been lucky this day. She had to thank the guy, even if

he was white—Mama’d taught her manners, too. Jewel hurried after him, trying to arrange her torn top into decent coverage, but one boob or the other kept falling out. Great, now she had to walk down Michigan Avenue with her tits on display. And wouldn’t they love it back at the office.

She spotted her rescuer knifing through the crowd. She really should get back to her job, but, hell, he’d pretty much saved her brown ass. “Hey!” she shouted. No response.

He crossed the street. She hurried after him; damn, the man could move. The crossing signal switched to “Don’t” as he entered the Chelsea Hotel.

Jewel ran for it.

PATRIOTS GATHER

In his hotel room, Mitch Parsons knotted his tie and then added his NRA tie tack, its pewter eagle clutching crossed rifles in its talons. No, his mission in Chicago wasn't sanctioned by the NRA—hell, his fellow board members were dead set against it, chickens that they were—but he'd be damned if he'd set aside his allegiance because of that. Anyway, they were dead wrong. The move in Oregon to take away guns would just get worse and worse if they let things go, and soon enough they'd all be disarmed, man and boy.

He cocked his thumb and aimed an index-finger gun at Noah Stone's smile, which looked up at the fingertip muzzle from the cover of a *Time* magazine on the dresser. The headline read, "The Alliance's Pied Piper."

Mitch squeezed the trigger and wished . . . well, he wasn't sure what to wish for other than Stone gone. Like Daddy used to say, if wishes were horses, beggars would ride. Wishing would do no good. So here he was in Chicago.

He rubbed his nervous belly. He pulled a mini Tootsie Roll from the stash in his pocket. The rush of chocolate eased him even though it meant trouble with his ulcer. For the millionth time, he wished smoking wasn't bad for people. Not that Tootsie Rolls were much better.

But he really had no reason to be worried. He was doing the right thing. Noah Stone was weakening American freedom in this troubled world, and that amounted to treason.

Mitch flicked a glance at the *Time* cover. It was a matter of duty. And Hank Soldado sure sounded like the man to get it done. He was an Oath Keeper, a soldier who had sworn to protect the constitution, one of the heroes who will not obey any order to disarm the American people. Hell, even his name meant "soldier." By God, together they'd stop Stone.

...

In the Chelsea Hotel's lobby, habits from years of police work set Hank to scanning the room, alert for body language that signaled trouble.

With all the glamour and finery of models posing at a fashion shoot, the usual high-priced hookers littered red velvet furniture. The usual bellboys idled, and the usual on-the-road businessmen eyed the usual high-priced hookers. Except for a long table featuring stacks of pamphlets and posters of a gray-haired man, nothing seemed other than ordinary.

The table was manned by three cheerful-looking women ranging from their twenties to their forties. The youngest-looking—red-haired, trim and smiley and pretty—accosted people with handfuls of material while the other two helped lines of men and women who were lively with chatting and smiles register for something. Signs on the table told Hank to "GET INFORMATION ABOUT THE ALLIANCE HERE."

Was this the Alliance the NRA guy had called him about? When he passed the table on the way to the elevator, the red-head approached, gave him a sprightly smile, and said, "Excuse me, sir, I'd like to tell you about—"

He waved her off, but he smiled when he did it. The proselytizer shrugged and then advanced on a woman pulling a suitcase. He strode into an elevator and punched the button for his floor.

A brown-skinned young woman whirled through the revolving doors on the lobby's far side. She struggled to keep a torn top together—the girl from the courtyard? What the hell was she doing here?

The elevator door closed. A faint scent of gunpowder wafted from his holster, but the NRA guy shouldn't mind that.

...

Jewel's rush dwindled to a stop when the elevator shut its doors with her goal behind them. Robbed of purpose, she stood, unsure what to do.

The terror of the attack in the courtyard surged into her mind, and the room tilted sideways. Hands came from behind and caught her under the arms.

"Gotcha."

Jewel straightened and turned. The hands belonged to a perky redhead. Jewel said, "I'm fine, I'm okay."

Her knees sagged, Red caught her again, and Jewel told her pride to find something better to do while she let the woman help her to a chair beside a long table. Looking up into worried green eyes, Jewel said thanks.

Red's concern lightened into a smile. "You just sit till you feel better." She pointed to Jewel's gaping blouse. "I can help you with that." The woman rummaged in a box under the table and pulled out a white T-shirt. She aimed a finger at a corner of the lobby. "The women's is over there."

"Thanks again." Jewel waited a minute, and then took care standing. She was steady enough. Clutching the shirt to her chest, she hurried to the restroom. In the privacy of a stall, she took off the remains of her top and pulled the T-shirt on.

At the sink, she dampened a paper towel with cold water and wiped her face. Feeling better, she checked out her new look.

Her chest bore "The Alliance," its letters created with a checkerboard of pinks and tans and browns. The shirt wasn't pretty, but at least it covered her. She touched the logo with a fingertip—one spot matched the color of her skin.

Back in the lobby, the redhead asked, "Are you all right?"

Because she had been a help, Jewel smiled and said yes.

Red offered a brochure. "Maybe you'd be interested in the Alliance?"

"Sorry, I'm not buying anything, and I've got to get to work."

"Oh, we're not selling anything, just trying to, ah . . ." She shrugged and grinned. "This's gonna sound really corny, but we're trying to make the world better."

Jewel snorted. "You want to do that, start with a great big match."

Red laughed. "It's all in the brochure."

Jewel took it. A silver square reflected her face. A caption said, "You're looking at someone who can make life better." At the bottom was a smaller version of the Alliance logo.

Probably a con that promised to turn your life around quick and easy-peasy, all-you-gotta-do-is-believe-and-buy-our-salvation-program-complete-with-a-free-DVD-only \$29.95.

Red handed her a slip of yellow paper. "This is about tonight's rally. I hope you'll come. It's free."

Not meaning it, but not wanting to cloud the sunny woman's enthusiasm, Jewel stuffed it and the brochure in her purse and said, "Sure." She checked her watch. "Damn, they're gonna fire my ass."

...

A knock sounded on Mitch's door. He opened it, and a man dressed in jeans and a Windbreaker stepped in. His gaze swept the room—Mitch sensed power coiled to spring.

What he'd been told was true; Hank Soldado did not look like someone you would want to mess with. Broad in the shoulders and thick-chested—the man looked like he'd swallowed a barrel—he was in his early thirties and had dark brown eyes, black hair, and ordinary features that Mitch thought were pleasant but not striking. But then Soldado's gaze settled on Mitch with probing intensity.

Mitch offered a handshake. "Mr. Soldado, I'm Mitch Parsons. Pleased to meet you."

Soldado's face eased as he smiled and shook hands. "Call me Hank. And let me thank you for all the things the NRA does."

Mitch held up his hand to dismiss that thought. "Well, it's not doing anything today. I'm here as a private citizen, not as a member of the NRA board, but what I want to do is in the interests of you and me—hell, of anyone who wants to hold on to their rights as an American." Mitch handed him the *Time* magazine with Noah Stone on the cover. "This man is your mission."

Hank studied the magazine. "I saw this guy on posters in the lobby. He's a Pied Piper? Charming rats?"

Anger burned in Mitch's gut. "He and his Alliance are *erasing* the Second Amendment." He took a deep breath and tried to cool down. "The reason you're here."

"And Stone . . . ?"

Mitch grabbed the magazine and threw it across the room. "The Alliance's preacher. *Time* isn't far wrong in calling him a Pied Piper. A half million people have joined the Alliance, most of them in its home state, Oregon. The politicians it backs win elections. It's stronger than the old Tea Party movement was."

"The NRA's—I mean, your interest?"

"He got Oregon to ban guns a year ago. We've challenged our asses off and the ban is still there. And it looks like it'll spread to Washington and California." He wanted to spit. "To start with."

Hank's eyebrows rose. "I think I'd have heard about a ban on guns. The NRA would have exploded, and the press wouldn't have been far behind."

Mitch waved that off. "Technically, I guess it's not a ban, but the result is the same. They slap you with an automatic felony conviction if you get caught with an illegal lethal firearm. And they confiscate them when you enter the state. We've kept quiet about it because we don't want it to spread."

Hank said, "That's legal?"

"They think so."

He scowled. "Damn. That's just wrong. We've got rights."

Mitch's insides eased. "I'm glad to hear you say that. Did you ever hear what Wayne LaPierre said back at the 2014 CPAC conference? 'There is no greater freedom than the right to survive and protect our families with all the rifles, shotguns, and handguns we want.'"

"Amen to that. I gotta hand it to you, standing up like this on your own. I'm with you."

Pleased, Mitch shrugged. "I just want to help support the people, my customers. I own a couple gun stores, do some gun shows."

"You told me there's a meeting here where this Noah Stone is going to be?"

"He's speaking tonight at McCormick Place, a big rally for the Alliance. You can see what he's all about there." Mitch frowned. "I'm going with you, but it's gonna be hard to keep still when he spouts his crap."

"I've got some sympathy for that." Soldado strode to the magazine and picked it up. He studied the cover and then said, "So what do you want to do about this guy?"

Mitch took a deep breath. This was going okay, and Soldado was a real pro. His service as a Military Police officer in Afghanistan and an Illinois state trooper showed. "First, I want to find a legal way to take him down. For instance, a lot of our people say that his Alliance is actually a church, a religion—you know how rabid our opponents can get, so it could be true. If it is a religion, we sic the Feds on them for political participation by a nonprofit. You're an investigator, maybe you can find some evidence."

"So you just want a little private-eye work? I ask because you wanted to know if I carried." He opened his jacket, and there was the butt of a pistol sticking out of a holster.

Mitch came to the decision he'd been putting off. Only a coward would hold back from the ultimate in the defense of his country. "Well, like we used to say in the Boy Scouts, be prepared. You're a soldier, a lawman. I assume you have, ah, in the line of your duty you've, you know . . ."

Hank nodded and gazed out the window. His tone was cold and flat when he said, “There are bad guys who won’t hurt anybody anymore, if that’s what you’re asking.” He could have been talking about the weather.

We’re coming, Noah Stone, we’re coming at you.



A SHOOTER STRIKES

Jewel slipped the dictation printout into a file folder, leaned back in her chair, and closed her aching eyes. She had really cranked to make up the time she’d lost at lunch, and still it had taken until—she glanced at her watch—shit, almost seven o’clock to finish transcribing the deposition. The sky was darkening; the receptionist had gone. The other legal secretaries’ cubes were empty and the partners’ offices dark except for Mr. Reese’s, the senior partner waiting for a hard copy.

She took the file to his office. He faced his big window, feet up on a credenza, leaning back in his oversized leather chair, probably thinking what a great man he was. She tapped on the door frame. “Mr. Reese? The Henderson deposition is done.”

He swung around, the corners of his lips turned down like he had a bad taste in his tight little mouth. “Bring it in.”

As she put the deposition on his desk, he stood and walked around to her. His slump-shouldered, potbellied body made his thousand-dollar suit look like a Kmart blue-light special. She said, “Will that be all, sir?”

“No. I need to speak to you about that”—he pointed at her chest—“that *garb* you’re wearing.”

“I can explain—”

“The organization you’re touting there has caused serious trouble for our West Coast clientele.”

Hell, their West Coast clients were always in trouble; their nails were manicured, but their hands were dirty. Although they were squeaky clean compared with the Chicago bunch.

Her boss's bunch.

She plucked at the Alliance T-shirt. "Well, it's not mine, really—"

"And you returned from lunch an hour late."

"Not a whole hour, and I was attacked by—"

"There are no acceptable excuses for either your tardiness or that . . . outfit. Completely unacceptable."

She looked at the floor so he wouldn't see her panic. She couldn't lose this job. She'd been incredibly lucky to find it; too many law firms in this city didn't see *black* and *legal secretary* as words that could go together. She said, "It won't happen again, sir."

"I know it won't. Clean out your desk."

Fear turned her stomach. Why was he doing this? Yeah, he was a jerk, but he'd never been a total ass. She looked up. "Please, Mr. Reese, can't I do something?"

He swept his gaze down her body and back. It felt like she was being stripped. "Well, you are a good worker . . ."

He widened his stance, put his hands on his hips, and glanced down. There was a bulge at his crotch. The letch grinned at her. "Perhaps there is something you can do."

Man, this was her day for dirtbags with eager pricks. She should have known. Her looks and body had made her a target since she was twelve. Anger steamed inside her.

She smiled up at him and stepped closer until her breasts touched his chest. He rubbed against her, and she forced herself to keep her smile from collapsing.

Wait for it . . .

He said, "All right. This one time I'm willing to make an except—"

She spat in his face, wheeled, and stomped out.

He screamed, "You're fired."

"Too late. I just quit, asshole!"

She ran to her desk as he yelled, "Slut!"

She whirled to face him. He wiped at her spit with the silk hanky he kept in his breast pocket, a sick look on his face.

Looked like he was going to barf. Good. She'd sue the bastard for sexual harassment, and then . . . The silence of the office got through to her. There were no witnesses. There was no way to prove what had happened.

Knowing who the firm's clients were, she decided suing wasn't a good idea. God damn the man. She turned to her desk, her workplace for three years. She picked up her picture of Chloe. It was just a snapshot from her fourth birthday party, cake icing on her nose above the grin that always came with her giggles, but she was clearly the most beautiful child in all the world.

And now . . . with no paycheck and the pink she had to buy for Timmy's addiction, in a few weeks there wouldn't be enough in the bank to cover the rent, much less food. Fear stirred again. She denied it with the thought that she could surely find some temp work. She had good skills. No problem.

Yeah, right—she was in deep shit.

Reese's voice came. "You're not gone."

Jewel swept her gaze over her desk for things to take with her. A yellow piece of paper caught her eye; the redhead at the hotel had given it to her. It said, "Want a better life? The Alliance, McCormick Place Grand Ballroom, 8:00 p.m."

Yeah, she wanted a better life. But who'd believe anybody could really make it happen . . . Actually, the redhead at the hotel had seemed to. And she'd been pretty cool about helping a half-naked crazy black woman.

Jewel slumped. She didn't want to go home right away, where she'd have to pretend to Chloe that everything was all right. So she'd go to this thing, kill some time, chill a little.

She called Juana and said, "I'm going to be later than I told you. Can you stay with Chloe?"

"Sure."

"You're an angel. Let me say hi to my sweetie and tell her what's happening."

Reese's hand reached past her and cut off the call. "Get out."

Holding back a sob, Jewel stuffed Chloe's picture into her bag and left to catch a bus for the Alliance rally.

...

Mercury-vapor lamps atop tall poles turned away night outside McCormick Place, the gigantic commercial complex near Lake Michigan. Inside the Grand Ballroom lobby, Hank and Mitch joined stragglers hurrying to enter before the Alliance program began.

Music reached Hank from speakers flanking a bank of entrance doors to the ballroom. The feel of it told him that the songwriter had smiled when he wrote the tune. And a tune it was, a sweet melody backed by foot-tapping rhythm.

Yeah, just like the old-time revivalists who used uplifting hymns to set up the sheep for a shearing as they flocked into the tent. But the people entering here didn't look sheep-like. They held their heads up and moved with vigor. They looked like people you'd call on to get things done. Hank wondered what the city would be like if it were filled with people like that.

Inside, Hank found a colorful throng pulsating with the music's beat. Banks of lights flooded a sea of seats surrounding a stage, and huge video screens hung from the ceiling. The place was packed—even the aisles were full. Everyone stood; the liveliness in the place was almost palpable.

Mitch said, "Jesus, look at 'em. It's a revival meeting."

Yeah, it did have a flavor of worshippers high on belief. Above the stage, screens showed the band. Like the music, the musicians smiled.

Hank searched for recognizable faces. And dangers.

...

Tension eased from Jewel as she stood at an aisle seat halfway to the stage. She couldn't remember the last time she had been stirred by the simple pleasure of music and rhythm. And the T-shirt she wore wasn't weird; there were a lot just like it. It felt

kinda like she was part of something the people around her seemed to feel pretty good about. It was catching.

She needed a lift. She'd always thought she was ready to do anything to take care of her own, but she hadn't been this day. On the other hand, she wouldn't have been too happy living in the skin of somebody who'd give an asshole a blow job to keep a paycheck coming.

The hell with that. She tuned in to the music and moved with it. A worn-looking Latino guy next to her smiled at her, and damned if she didn't smile back.

...

Hank expected a flunky to pump up the crowd by rushing onstage and gibbering about Noah Stone's wonderfulness, but no such commotion erupted. A silver-haired, average-sized man stepped onto the stage. A spotlight followed him to the center. He stopped there and turned to scan the audience that surrounded him.

The band ended its song, and the musicians rested their instruments and faced the speaker with expectant smiles. The crowd quieted until only a murmur filled the hall.

The guy was a real showman. Hank smirked at Mitch, who nodded back.

The TV screens cut to a close-up of the man the crowd squinted to see. He appeared to be in his sixties, good-looking but not handsome. A full mustache concealed his mouth and made his face sober, serious. His dark eyes glowed with intelligence. And intensity.

Hank wondered if he was in for a fire-and-brimstone harangue. Then a smile transformed Stone's face into friendliness, and his eyes sparkled with humor. Hank resisted the pull of the man's likeability.

Stone said, "Hi."

The audience breathed a sigh.

"I'm Noah Stone, and I can't tell you how glad I am to see you. And to talk to you about joining me in the Alliance.

“The reason I want you with me is simple—I want to live a good life in the richest country in the world. But it’s not material wealth I’m after, it’s the things that make getting up in the morning a good thing to do. Shelter. Food. Good air. Good water. Safety. Work to do. Health. Community. Freedom. Is that what you want?”

The crowd muttered, “Yes” and “You bet” and “Tell me about it.”

Stone frowned. “But I can’t prosper with a gun held to my head. I can’t prosper when courts flood the streets with criminals. I can’t prosper when schools are so impoverished that they can’t teach my children. I can’t prosper when corruption is the standard, not the exception. In today’s world, I can’t prosper.”

...

Jewel clenched a fist and murmured, “Right on.” The Latino beside her whispered, “*Es verdad.*” Damn right it was the truth.

Stone moved in a circle on the stage, the overhead screens keeping his face in view. He said, “Like you, I’m willing to work hard to prosper, but I can’t do it alone. You might argue, hey, we’re not alone, we have government and religion to help us. The sad truth is that, despite everything governments and religions do, and sometimes *because* of what they do, we are steadily losing to a growing crush of problems.

“It doesn’t even help to be rich. The rich don’t have clean air. Or safety from kidnapers who take them for ransom. Or a healthy world that holds promise for their children.

“The rich don’t prosper.”

...

A woman in the third row whose husband’s income was sixty thousand dollars a day pictured her youngest, his backpack oxygen tank and face mask warding off daily asthma attacks caused by toxins in the air whenever he went outdoors. She nodded.

Stone said, “It doesn’t help to be religious. Yes, a church community can help you bear the burden, and perhaps you’re promised something better after you die—but while you live in this world, prayer and faith are losing ground to crime, poverty, guns, and drugs.

“Even worse, faiths collide and fanaticism spawns death and destruction. Worshippers are led to murder in the name of God or Allah, and the worst of all human wrongs becomes exalted as a virtuous act.

“The religious don’t prosper.”

...

A woman who had lost her husband and her oldest child to a Palestinian suicide bomber in Tel Aviv nodded. Tears spilled as she kept her gaze fastened on Noah Stone.

Across the arena from the woman, a Palestinian-American bit down hard at the memory of his parents, slain in Gaza by an Israeli Defense Force missile.

Noah’s eyes crinkled with an ironic grin. “Luckily, though, we can count on our government, can’t we?”

The Palestinian joined the crowd in a bitter chuckle.

“We can count on our ‘leaders’ to gridlock because of sheep-like partisanship—to pander to ignorance and to fear-monger—to grasp for money and reelection—to vote according to influence, not conscience—to rule by ideology, not govern by reason.

“Back in the nineties a Kentucky legislator introduced a bill to allow police officers to destroy confiscated guns, and the cops were all for it. But lobbyists claimed it was gun control that threatened Second Amendment rights, and the bill was changed to require the police to sell the guns and then use the money to buy bulletproof vests. Thousands of guns were put back on the street, and the cops had brand-new bulletproof vests to protect them from those weapons. *Stupid* is too nice a word for that kind of idiocy.

“Guns. Guns that kill. Lethal firearms.” He gazed at the floor of the stage for a moment, and there was a sad quality to his voice when he continued. “Now *there’s* cancer that robs us of our future, where murdered children and men and women cannot give us their energy, their lives, their creativity, their smiles, their songs, their laughter. Their love. For so long, it has been politically impossible to do anything to control unrestricted gun violence because of the cultural logjam nurtured by gun makers and the National Rifle Association.”

• • •

Jason Schaeffer, proud member of the Mackinac Militia, bristled at the insult to the NRA. Well, he had a message for Mister High-and-Mighty. He slipped his hand into the roomy pocket of his camo pants and caressed the cool steel of his pistol. It was time to get closer to the stage.

He stepped into the aisle, said, “Excuse me,” and slipped past the woman standing there.

• • •

Mitch clenched his fists. Here came another baseless attack on their rights. Oh, he sensed the lure of Stone’s appeal, all right, but he had no trouble remaining detached. He observed the rapt faces around him and saw the power Stone had. This man was dangerous.

But he was just a typical gun-control nut. There were plenty of laws on the books to make sure only honest people got guns. They just needed to be enforced better. And criminals ignored laws anyway. There was really nothing new laws could do.

On the stage, Noah said, “To be fair to the NRA, the root of the problem is America’s Wild West mentality—*our* Wild West mentality—that feeds the NRA’s growth and influence. You see it in the militias that thrive in our nation, nourished by anti-government paranoia. The problem is not ‘them,’ it’s us. There isn’t a way to fix that anytime soon.

“But maybe there is a way to use that cowboy attitude *against* the shooters who say we’ll be safer when there are *more* guns. Until now, that sounded like nonsense to me, but where I live, more guns *are* the answer.

“We’re putting defensive guns into the hands of the people who are the victims, the women and men who are unarmed targets. Now, armed with nonlethal guns, they can fight attackers such as rapists, robbers, shooters, and racists.” He smiled and lifted his gaze. “And they do, much to the sorrow of the bad guys.”

He chuckled, and then looked out at the audience. “The other day I was asked if I was for or against guns.” He grinned. “I said yes.”

• • •

Hank looked at Mitch, who scowled down at the stage. “You didn’t tell me about that.”

Mitch shrugged. “It didn’t seem important.”

“But it is. The whole point of having a gun is to defend yourself.” He focused on Stone again. How could the guy be against guns if he was arming people?

Mitch turned to him. “The defensive stuff he’s talking about won’t protect us from tyranny by our so-called ‘government.’”

Hank shook his head. “Come on, you know that’s nonsense. Isn’t going to happen, this is America. Our democracy is just too strong.”

“You never know.”

Stone’s voice surged with energy and enthusiasm. “What we’re doing about guns is just one example of how we, as a people, are strong and smart. We clean up after floods and earthquakes. We conquer disease. We fight famine. We defeat oppressors. Together, we work wonders. But these days we’re breaking into smaller and smaller bits—cults, religions, militias, jihadists, splinters that are angrily pro this and anti that.

“We don’t prosper.